

Order and rightness in the thought of ansem of canterbury



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In a theological age conscious of the damage inflicted by sin upon human reason, Anselm of Canterbury emerges as one of its greatest champions. Though his maintenance of the primacy of faith never wavered, his project was one of using the tool of reason to expound faith, and he was bold in his use of it. As Anselm writes in his *Proslogion*, 'I believe so that I may understand.' It is Anselm's desire to impose reasoned argument onto theology that prompts his investigation, and subsequent understanding, of God's nature, of Christology, soteriology, and truth. Even a cursory glance at Anselm's hypotheses reveals that what underpins the entirety of his doctrine, is an adherence to the notion of 'fittingness'- understanding God, the universe and our place in it through the lens of 'appropriateness.' In this essay, I will endeavour to engage with Anselm's concept of fittingness in relation to sister concepts such as order, rightness and justice, and seek to sustain the line of argument that these principles underwrite Anselm's entire theological system; it is through this idea of divine order that Anselm defines God- what his nature must be like in order to comply, or fit, with the universal structure God has himself created- and even imposes limits upon God stemming from this same concern for the maintenance of order. In addition, Anselm's fixation with rightness in relation to universal order marks out his characterization of truth and of justice within God's creation. This has dramatic implications for Anselm's soteriological doctrine- his understanding of the fall of man and, in turn, his understanding of redemption as most fittingly brought about through the incarnation. Furthermore, Anselm's appropriateness concept provides the backbone for his theory of the immaculate conception and the need for a pure, untarnished birth to restore harmony through redemption.

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Undergirding Anselm's entire theological system is a broad belief in the harmony and God-given order of the universe, a concept Anselm refers to as *rectitudo*. McGrath offers a useful definition: 'the basic meaning of *rectitudo* is the divine ordering of the universe, which has its origin in the divine will, and which is itself a reflection of the divine will. [1]' God orders the universe according to perfect beauty and structure, hence its existing as a reflection of God's own perfect being. As Southern writes, 'perfect power, perfect justice, perfect order, perfect beauty: the combination of these qualities in the highest degree constitutes the perfection of the universe in reflecting the divine nature.[2]' God created the universe to be perfectly good, and it must, for Anselm, remain such, in accordance with God's designation of the world as good in Genesis: 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.' Man's existing in a state of perpetual blessedness is part of the overall purpose of the creation and so, as Anselm writes, ...it is only by Man's achieving this blessedness that God's word in creation could remain inviolable, and the end for which the universe was created could be achieved. There could be no going back on God's Word: He had spoken on each of the six days of Creation and seen that all was good: He had ordained the end- Man's blessedness; and that end must be achieved. [3]

The idea of *rectitudo* gives rise to Anselm's conception of Justice which is, as Deme notes, 'unquestionably one of the dominant concepts of Anselm's Christology.[4]' The notion has moral order as its basis and works in terms of the restoration of disorder, a system of payment and retribution for the causers of this disarray. The order of the universe turns or exists around this idea of give and take as the building blocks for harmony. Deme, I think,

defines Justice clearly by referring to it as ‘ done if one renders to the other what one owes, and, in the same way, to be just means to fulfil one’s duty of rendering to oneself or to the other that what is required in a given relationship.[5]’ The use of language such as ‘ owe’ and ‘ duty’ in Deme’s definition, however, does potentially make it sound as if Anselm’s concept of Justice is tantamount to our human concept of justice; though this is one aspect of his meaning, Justice more widely refers to moral rectitude. McGrath makes this distinction by talking of ‘ supreme justice[6]’ and ‘ strict justice’, the former referring to God’s regulation of himself in conformity with moral order, and the latter referring to the regulation of man’s actions, both representing equal parts in Anselm’s understanding of Justice.

Anselm’s definition of truth also stems from this idea of universal rectitude; indeed, the two concepts are so closely entwined, they are almost synonymous. Where justice represents moral rectitude, truth (*veritas*) can be understood as its counterpart, metaphysical rectitude.[7] As McGrath defines it, ‘ anything which is as it ought to be is true, and anything which is true is as it ought to be.[8]’ Things that are true are true because they accord with God’s idea of them. Relative to the *rectitudo* concept, we derive the related notion of ‘ fittingness’. According to Anselm, an action or occurrence is ‘ fitting’ if the occurrence could have not happened, or could have happened in an alternative way, but does happen and happens in the way it does, because any other way would go against God’s honour and majesty through going against his universal order and systematization of his creation.

Hopkins helpfully makes the distinction between the concept of fittingness and that of necessary reasons. The latter, he explains, ‘ can happen in one

and only one way because anything else would be inconsistent with the system of basic truths about God's nature and will.[9]' When Anselm talks of unfittingness, however, it is not synonymous with inconsistency or logical impossibility. Rather, an unfitting action happens out of compliance to God's universal order as opposed to out of logical necessity.

It seems that, throughout Anselm's works, this idea of fittingness in relation to universal harmony acts as Anselm's north star; all other doctrine falls into place, pivoting on this idea of universal order which remains constant.

Anselm even finds himself using the concept to define God and his limits. God's characteristics are necessary for the maintenance of his nature; to change them in any way would be unfitting. As McGrath observes, ' God's attributes are essential to his being, and are not merely accidents which he can change at will...Anselm's important theological insight concerning the divine attributes is that they must co-exist within the limiting conditions that they impose on each other. [10]' It seems, then, that because of the order which God created as reflective of his own harmonious nature, God is bound to act in particular ways, to act appropriate to the limits of his nature- in redeeming man, for example. For Anselm, God can be seen to be just because he acts in conformity to the general order, he acts in a way which is appropriate to his nature as the highest good; Anselm writes in the Proslogion that ' You are just not because you give us our due, but because you do what befits you as the supreme good. Thus, then, without inconsistency just do you punish and justly do you pardon. [11]' If God acts justly, he acts justly in a twofold way- justly towards mankind and justly in acting in accordance with his own nature as just- he has to be just to be

just ! It is important to note that, for Anselm, the maintenance of God's nature relies on his rectifying any disturbances to the moral order he has created, he is the *summa iustitia*, bound by his own nature to restore the moral rectitude of the created order...[12]' Justice must be restored because anything unjust is inconsistent with God's nature. This restoration of order is also essential for the maintenance of God's nature as an omnipotent being (which needs to be maintained as it is one of his essential characteristics which cannot be compromised). Hence, God must maintain order in order to comply with his own nature; Southern sets the argument out as follows[13]:

- 1) God's purpose in the creation of Man and the universe has been frustrated
- 2) But it is impossible that the purpose of an omnipotent Being should be frustrated.
- 3) Therefore, a means of redemption must exist.

Although this argument is referring specifically to the need for God's redemption of man to restore order, an idea I have not yet come to expound, it succeeds in demonstrating more broadly the overall mechanism of the universe- something occurs which causes disorder which, in turn, causes inconsistency in God's nature, and therefore requires fixing, because it is fitting that God's nature remain consistent. The entire system hinges on order, harmony and fittingness.

So far, I have attempted to offer an account of Anselm's theory of universal order and how this underpins concepts such as justice and truth, as well as Anselm's conception of God and his limits, in the universal scheme of things. I will now move on to assess how these concepts fit together in the soteriological picture which Anselm offers.

Anselm argues that man was created in a state of *iustitia originalis*; the way that God had ordered creation was to have man's will as submitted entirely to God: 'All the will of a rational creature ought to be subject to the will of God. [14]' At the fall, Adam and Eve disturbed the moral rectitude of the universe by dishonoring God and withholding from submitting their rational will to him. Anselm uses the word 'honour' in order to designate what creatures owe to God in order to maintain harmony, 'the complex of service and worship which the whole Creation...owes to the creator, and which preserves everything in its due place. [15]' Anselm writes that 'Someone who does not render to God this honor due to him is taking away from God what is his, and dishonoring God, and this is what it is to sin. [16]' Following this dishonoring, man could now no longer submit his rational will to God and thus human nature fell into a state of *Iniustitia*, which represents the essence of the original sin passed down through humanity through the human seed. Humankind, once in a state of eternal blessedness, in their rightful place in the universal order of things, is now fallen. God cannot simply forgive man with a simple act of mercy because 'it would destroy the beauty of the universe, and in doing this would degrade God the Creator, Man the creature, and the whole creation. [17]' Because of the 'restrictions' imposed upon God by his nature, God must act in a way appropriate or fitting in relation to the general order of things. But he must rectify things; as Deme observes, 'God cannot let himself be exposed to an act of injustice nor can he let himself become a victim; if he did not re-create the perfect justice of the universe according to its original beauty and order, he would legitimize the greatest injustice of which he would then inevitably become an organic and active part. [18]' God has a two-fold re-ordering to bring about- 'the

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sinner has taken what is God's: God takes what is Man's- his blessedness[19]', but the restoration of order requires that blessedness be restored to some extent. Therefore, God must take blessedness away and then rectify the damage which is a consequence. Anselm also maintains that the rectification of humanity is required to restore order in heaven; God has to make up for the number of angels which fell, and redeemed humans can make up the numbers of angelic worshipers of God.

To restore the harmony of the created order, God must receive an offering which exceeds the crime committed by humanity. No member of the human race can restore the blessedness which they have lost or make up for the past disobedience because they cannot do enough to compensate (each person already owes everything they can give and more than that). The issue is that only God can offer sufficient satisfaction but he shouldn't because the debt is not his to pay. Therefore, in order to resolve the issue, a God-man must make the offering. For Anselm, the incarnation represents the most fitting way for redemption to occur. The offering which Christ makes on the cross exceeds anything which humanity could give, and is great enough to make up for all the sins of the world combined. Humanity must still participate in Christ's offering but Jesus pays the ultimate price. Anselm makes use of a feudal analogy in order to demonstrate the mechanism of the crucifixion- he illustrates an image of a society within which every member has committed a capital crime, except one. The innocent man offers himself as a sacrifice in order to make up for the sins of the rest of society and secure their salvation. The King pardons the society on the condition that they come to court on the day of the man's death. Likewise, humanity can

share in the salvation brought by Christ as long as they participate in his sacrifice through faith and the sacraments. Jesus' death is the most fitting method for redemption since his sacrifice is non-necessary; as Hopkins writes, ' Jesus freely underwent death on man's behalf, so that His death honors rather than reproaches God.[20]'

Aside from being the most fitting method for redemption, the incarnation is also executed in the most fitting way possible through the immaculate conception. Jesus needed both to be a member of the Adamic race whilst simultaneously remaining free from sin; the virgin birth was a miraculous event as opposed to a ' natural' or ' voluntary' one and, thus if the propagation of a man from a virgin is not voluntary or natural but miraculous, like that which brought forth a woman from a man alone, and like the creation of man from clay, it is clear that it cannot submit to the laws and merits of that propagation which nature and the will- although separately- work.[21] Mary was also free of sin, redeemed by the future loss of her son.[22] The redeemer was not, therefore conceived in sin. In addition, it is, according to Anselm, suitably fitting that Jesus be born of a woman, since it was female kind through which sin entered the human race- ' it is extremely appropriate that, just as the sin of mankind and the cause of our damnation originated from a woman, correspondingly the medicine of sin and the cause of salvation should be born of a woman. [23]'

In conclusion, it seems that, for Anselm, many of the major areas of consideration in theology- Christology, soteriology, the nature of God, and morality- are entirely grounded in the idea of universal order and the achievement of fittingness therein. Not only do Anselm's conceptions of <https://assignbuster.com/order-and-rightness-in-the-thought-of-anselm-of-canterbury/>

justice and of truth stem from the notion of rectitude in the created order, but his understanding of God's nature and limits has its basis in this idea of fittingness and harmony. These fundamental building blocks are utilized in the Anselmian system in order to generate a theological framework upon which his Christology and soteriology rests. The maintenance of universal harmony is what binds Anselm's theology together in a tightly-knit structure; his understanding of man's sinfulness, the necessity for redemption and the mechanism of this redemption germinates directly from his fixation with fittingness, order and rightness.

[1] McGrath, A. E., ' Rectitude: The Moral Foundation of Anselm of Canterbury's Soteriology', *The Downside Review*, 99: 336 (1981)

[2] Southern, R. W., *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

[3] Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. and trans. by B. Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[4] Deme, D., *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Kent: Ashgate, 2003)

[5] *ibid.*

[6] McGrath, A. E., ' Rectitude: The Moral Foundation of Anselm of Canterbury's Soteriology', *The Downside Review*, 99: 336 (1981)

[7] *ibid.*

[8] *ibid.*

[9] Hopkins, J., *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972)

[10] McGrath, A. E., 'Rectitude: The Moral Foundation of Anselm of Canterbury's Soteriology', *The Downside Review*, 99: 336 (1981)

[11] Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 10.

[12] McGrath, A. E., 'Rectitude: The Moral Foundation of Anselm of Canterbury's Soteriology', *The Downside Review*, 99: 336 (1981)

[13] Southern, R. W., *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

[14] Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. and trans. by B. Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[15] Southern, R. W., *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

[16] Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. and trans. by B. Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[17] Southern, R. W., *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

[18] Deme, D., *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Kent: Ashgate, 2003)

[19] Southern, R. W., *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

[20] Hopkins, J., *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972)

[21] Anselm of Canterbury, *On the Virgin conception and Original Sin*, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. and trans. by B. Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[22] Hopkins, J., *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972)

[23] Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. and trans. by B. Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).